A squadron of five helicopters swooped down over the sleepy village, awakening the population with a barrage of gun fire and killing several villagers who were out in the open and unable to find shelter. A few days later, a troop of some hundred soldiers surrounded the area making escape impossible. They closed in and demanded a village assembly in the main square. The officer told the villagers that they had 15 days to "repent their sins" and admit their support of the guerrilla movement. The officer expected the villagers to come forward with names of people who were guerrilla members, or families who harboured and fed them. If they didn't, they would witness a far greater retribution than they had experienced a few days before. Stories of military atrocities carried out in other villages, and this particular experience, were enough to have the Perez family and some 50 others pack up their meager belongings and start their long trek through the Guatemala forests into Mexico.

**Numbers**
The total number of refugees in Mexico from Guatemala is now estimated at 200,000. (The most recent large entry occurred in June 1983, in the Ocoingo area of Chiapas where some 1,000 refugees crossed the border en masse.) Some 90,000 of these, principally children, women and older people, reside across a narrow strip along the Mexico-Guatemala border with the highest concentration found in the San Cristobal region where there are 77 settlements and 18 camps with 45,000 refugees.

**Background**
Guatemalan refugees in Mexico are primarily in-

In Guatemala, the long history of ruthless military dictatorship reached its apex under the recently deposed regime of Efrain Rios Montt. Since the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman's government in 1954, the military has exercised an uninterrupted control over the country. In the last 30 years, an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 people have died at the hands of the military — the vast majority of them peasants and rural workers.

In recent years the violence has intensified under the rules of Generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt. In the face of rising opposition worker mobilization (particularly resulting from the reconstruction efforts following the earthquake of 1976), the government established a conscious policy of subverting possible opposition.

The first phase of the policy was targeted at community leaders (in particular, clerical workers). As phase one failed to counteract the mounting activity of the guerrilla movement, a second phase was institutionalized under Lucas Garcia and intensified under Rios Montt which involved bombing and large-scale harassment. Its intent was to destroy the “base” of guerrilla activity. The increased repression involved destroying food supplies by burning peasant fields and killing livestock, as well as systematic elimination of “suspected” guerrillas. Moreover, the repression assumed a racist dimension as most of the perceived opposition was seen to come from the Indian populations (60% of the country).

Following the coup d’etat in March of 1982 which brought Rios Montt to power, some speculated that the spiral of political violence would cease. Instead, matters worsened. On July 30, 1982, Rios Montt
declared a state of siege for “30 days” - by December 30, it was still in effect; and the President is on record as having stated that “we declared a state of siege so we could kill legally.” In the first month of the siege, 9,000 Guatemalans fled to Mexico.

The following nine months witnessed a cumulative increase in the flow of refugees, primarily from the northern provinces bordering on Mexico (El Quiche, Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, Tolonicapan, Solola, Chimaltenango, Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz). These provinces also have large percentages of indigenous populations. Virtually all the refugees are Indians whose long history of subjugation in a traditionally racially divided society reached its culmination under Rios Montt. Though the depiction of the military’s policy as genocidal may be excessive, there is little doubt that the indigenous peoples have been singled out for political persecution or death.

Shortly after the implementation of the siege, on July 17th, the entire village-rural-estate of San Francisco, comprised of Chij Indians was massacred. Only four men survived. According to an American Anthropological Association estimate, 350 men, women and children of all ages were systematically killed. Many of the refugees in the state of Chiapas in Mexico cited the San Francisco massacre as the incident which drove them to flee. They feared the spread of the government’s policy of destruction.

The massacre of San Francisco, though not typical, was important in one other respect. A combination of pressure by the U.S. administration (to reform the Guatemalan military’s anti-guerrilla tactics), and a massive outcry in response to the publicity attracted by the massacre, provoked Rios Montt to alter his strategy. His continued offensive was henceforth to involve: (1) a professionalization of the military; (2) the introduction of compulsory service in civilian militias; and (3) a so-called "frijoles y fusiles" (beans and rifles) campaign. The latter attempt would provide beans for those sectors willing to tolerate the regime and treat so-called insurgent sectors forcibly.

A sophisticated merger of civic action programmes and public relations served to obscure the continued repression. Thus Guatemala could testify to an improving human rights record. Obscuring of reality was extended to the understanding of the plight of the refugees in an attempt to diminish the criticism that was directed at Rios Montt.

The peak flow of refugees to Chiapas occurred in the period between October and December 1982 under the revised version of Rios Montt’s anti-guerrilla movement. In the last week of October and the first week of November, 10,000 refugees (UNHCR estimates) crossed the border. Many of these were expelled. The Coordinator of Programs for the UNHCR, Alfredo Witschi, suggests that most of the refugees arriving up until February of 1983 had left their villages the preceding June and had been wandering until their arrival in Chiapas.

Witschi estimates that 95% of the refugees are from villages in the border provinces of Guatemala. All the refugees spoke to came from within a radius of three to five kilometers from their villages. They are forced to stay within that area with the threat of being summarily killed if they attempt to leave. Witschi estimates that 95% of the refugees are from villages in the border provinces of Guatemala. All the refugees spoke to came from within a radius of three to five kilometers from their villages. They are forced to stay within that area with the threat of being summarily killed if they attempt to leave. Witschi estimates that 95% of the refugees are from villages in the border provinces of Guatemala. All the refugees spoke to came from within a radius of three to five kilometers from their villages. They are forced to stay within that area with the threat of being summarily killed if they attempt to leave.

In fact, no involved nation is prepared to expose the reality of the refugee situation. Little can be learned about the condition of the refugees who have managed to escape. One complicating factor is North America's non-committal to the Protocol of 1967 or the 1951 Convention. Mexico’s fear of the spread of the “Central American Syndrome”, compounded by the tradition of social unrest in Chiapas, has led to an attempt to curtail the flow into Chiapas of potentially disrupting Guatemalan refugees.

Nor has Mexico ever maintained a coherent policy vis-a-vis Guatemala in general (unlike their open support of Nicaragua and the FDR of El Salvador). Some commentators add that U.S. pressure on Mexico to deliberately contain and downplay the refugee issue is designed to minimize potential criticism of the Guatemalan military regime in Reagan’s bid to supply military aid. The administration and care of the refugees who have fled to Mexico is undertaken by the Mexican Commission to Help Refugees (COMAR). But the implementation of its policy is wrought with confusion. COMAR’s plans for the future, for instance, are nebulous. Not only has there been no consistent policy (aside from isolation) on the part of the government, but the Commission itself is under a state of flux as the new administration of Miguel de la Madrid begins to percolate through the bureaucracy. It is clear, however, that COMAR is becoming more “hard-line”.

COMAR comprises several ministries. The major ones are External Affairs (the haven for the more progressive wing of the ruling PRI party), Labour, Internal Affairs and Immigration (the haven for the more conservative-xenophobic members of the PRI). In June 1983, Or­tiz Monestario, an appointee of ex­president Lopez Portillo’s from the Internal Affairs ministry, was replaced by an Immigration man: Mario Valles. And the gradual marginalization of the External Affairs branch in determining policy was illustrated by the fact that the news of the COMAR shake-up was discovered by External Affairs the day after it had already occurred. As COM­AR moves more “hard-line”, matters will not improve substantiately for the refugees.

The result of the Mexican government’s ambiguity and COMAR’s drift to a “hardline” position has been to deny the refugees the benefits of attaining refugee status. Indeed, Interior Minister Manuel Bartlett refers to the refugees, as “desplazados” or displaced people, the intention being to place them where they belong. This at least permits the authorities to contain the flow and mobility of the refugees, and isolate them from the rest of the world. This permits the new Mexican regime to adopt a policy to remove the refugee disturbance altogether.

The alternative of repatriating the “desplazados” to Guatemala floats through the COMAR ranks as an increasingly serious option. The Guatemalan government regularly makes offers to the UNHCR resettlement (including land offerings and supervision by missionaries) and guaranteed safety to the refugees and Mexican authorities. But Interior Minister Bartlett is committed to no repatriation of refugees. Herein lies the
problem: Guatemalans are yet to be recognized as refugees. As “desplazados” their repatriation would contravene no laws. Hence, technically the refugees could be forced to return even though this is not official policy.

However, the general lack of coherent policies vis-a-vis the totality of the Guatemalan situation prevents a decision whether or not to evict the refugees. In all probability, a preservation of the status quo and derailing of international pressure by containing and isolating the refugees will continue to be the Mexican approach, if only to allow the Mexicans some flexibility and to minimize potential criticism by internal or external sources.

In southern Mexico, there are currently 40,000 refugees organized into 57 different camps administered by COMAR and supported primarily by the UNHCR. The remaining approximately 100,000 refugees are integrated into Mexican villages (mostly communal “ejidos”) in the southern zone of the border region. Apart from assistance provided by the Church, the latter group of refugees receives no official support.

The government policy in the region has changed considerably in the past. Mexico pursued a policy of repatriation (contrary to the Convention and Protocol) for an extended period until sufficient international pressure was brought to bear on their policy. On October 21, 1982, 1,500 refugees were expelled from Mexico even though they were told by immigration officials that they were to be relocated further inside Mexico. Five days later, 2,000 refugees living in Camp Rancho Tejas were ordered back to Guatemala. Though the practice of repatriation has ceased, rumours of repatriation of the refugees continue to abound.

Until March of this year, incursions by the Guatemalan armed forces into Mexican territory were frequent. The Rios Montt regime justified the violation of Mexican territorial integrity by claiming, as Presidential Press Secretary Escobar Arquello did, that “the fact that they are refugees in Mexico shows that they are rebel collaborators and their false accusations reveal the subservience capacity to spread lies about the government.” Mexican official response to such actions had been muted. Troops were not sent and the tone of Mexican warnings was unduly soft. This failure to act decisively was indicative of Mexico’s general lack of policy on the Guatemalan issue and its hesitancy to become involved too deeply in the geopolitics of the region. Some analysts suggest that the cessation of raids was a result of international outcry as well as U.S. pressure on Rios Montt to avoid attracting attention if military aid were to be ratified by Congress. The major actors sought to play down the issue to serve their own interests until the military could be convinced of an alternative approach to the refugees. The effect is to obscure reality; the refugees suffer in the process.

Moreover, it is clear that the Mexicans would like the refugees removed from their soil and, not having signed the Protocol or Convention, the authorities are allowed widesweeping and arbitrary control. The refugees’ status as “desplazados” and the formal legal infrastructures permit the Mexican authorities to prevent adequate verifiability of projects and aid (funded by the UN and other international agencies). Alfredo Witschi, from the UNHCR, visits the refugee area only once a month, and admits that the best existing or allowed mechanism for critical assessment is through the auditing process. (The UNHCR is permitted to systematically screen the budgeting of COMAR — but this does not fulfill the requisites for adequate verification.)

The UNHCR is aware of its jurisdictional limitations as in the case of Honduras (also non-signatory). It is subject entirely to national and local law and custom. Recognizing the tenuousness of its position, rather than jeopardizing the entire project, the UNHCR prefers not to assert itself excessively.

Information and examination are further restricted. No agencies except the Church (whose own status vis-a-vis the refugees is subject to scrutiny by the authorities) are permitted to work in the region. Press access is highly restricted, as are international observer visits to camps. Roads and nearby small airports are constantly patrolled to prevent entry into the zone. The less information that flows out of the region, the more autonomy the authorities have in exercising their policy. They are not accountable to any agency, nor are they subject to criticism by the international community.

As it stands, Mexico is reluctant to offer the fleeing Guatemalans the benefits that would be granted were they to receive refugee status. They are neither protected nor are there plans for a “durable solution”. Instead, the threat of renewed Guatemalan army attacks persists and they are denied freedom of movement, access to gainful employment and access to land. They have no schools (except where run by the Church). They have no health clinics (except where one may exist to treat local populations) and the problem of disease and malnutrition, though better than a year ago, is dealt with only on an ad hoc basis. The refugees exist only as dependents of COMAR. The fostering of occupational projects is hampered by the UNHCR’s limited logistical position. But essentially, the Mexican approach is to preserve a situation in which the refugees enjoy a minimum of requirements for day-to-day existence, thereby minimizing the attractiveness to their staying in Mexico.

By impeding the outflow of information and minimizing the ability to critically assess the situation, Mexico leaves the world in the dark, ensuring that little pressure can be brought to bear on the authorities to improve the lot of the Guatemalans. And due to their static and miserable lot, the refugees may find the option of returning to Guatemala more attractive, thereby allowing the Mexicans to evict the refugees without resorting to coercive measures.